

Guyana Leader Set to Take New Term After a Vote Denounced as Flawed

Electoral officials appear ready to give its president, David E. Granger, another term and control over the country's new oil riches. Observers cry foul.

By Anatoly Kurmanaev

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Guyana's electoral authorities set the stage for the re-election of the country's president late Friday, when they declared the country's ruling party the winner of the capital region, in a widely denounced process that threatens to isolate the small South American nation and new oil producer.

"A president sworn in on the basis of those results will not be considered legitimate," the American, Canadian, British and European Union embassies said Friday in a joint statement.

Guyana in January began to export the first trickle of the massive crude reserves discovered off its coast, a move that is expected to transform the poor former British sugar colony into a petrostate in the coming years. A new term would give the president, David E. Granger, power to manage proceeds from those exports.

However, the flawed vote signals for many Guyanese a return to the political malaise of the 1980s, when the predecessor of Mr. Granger's party ruled the country through a series of sham elections and with the support of the army.

The Western embassies joined four international observer missions in accusing Guyana's electoral officials of subverting the vote count after the March 2 general elections. They claim the results from the capital, Georgetown, were tabulated in an opaque way and don't match the numbers from the polling stations.

The announcement of the results also violated Wednesday's ruling by Guyana's top judge, who ordered the electoral commission to change the vote counting process to comply with the law.

“Democratic nations can’t ignore this blatant disregard for rule of law,” the State Department’s top Latin America official, Michael G. Kozak, said on Twitter Friday. “Respect the will of the Guyanese people to choose their leader.”

The main party opposing Mr. Granger, the People’s Progressive Party, held a large lead in the national vote until the counting was suddenly halted in Georgetown the day after the election. The opposition leader, Bharrat Jagdeo, said the P.P.P. would boycott Parliament and lobby for international sanctions against the government if the electoral board refused to conduct a full recount.

“We won’t recognize the government,” Mr. Jagdeo said. “Guyana will become just like Venezuela,” he added, referring to the neighboring country convulsed by sanctions and political crisis.

The results declaration could spark a new wave of protests in opposition strongholds across Guyana’s sugar belt, which earlier this month led to one death. Political tensions in the country are fed by a historical ethnic rift, with Guyanese of African descent supporting the government and ethnic Indians favoring the opposition.

Each side is afraid the opposing party will exclude it from the oil riches and use proceeds from crude exports to cement its political power for decades.

The promise of oil riches has raised the cost of losing political power in Guyana, convincing Mr. Granger to push ahead with the marred electoral process despite mounting international pressure, said Diego Moya-Ocampos, a political risk analyst at IHS Markit in London.

“They have clearly no intention to come up with a different result,” he said, referring to the ruling party. “They are pushing forward, and there’s no way back.”

The political crisis puts the spotlight on America’s largest oil company, Exxon Mobil, which has spearheaded the development of Guyana’s oil industry.

The company is planning to ramp up Guyana’s oil production to 750,000 barrels per day by 2025, overtaking the current output of the crumbling oil giant Venezuela. These plans, however, could be derailed by Guyana’s political paralysis.

“This crisis will have serious implications for the oil companies,” said Mr. Jagdeo, the opposition leader. He said his party will lobby Western government to halt the flow of Guyana’s oil revenues, adding that “it will be tantamount to supporting an illegal regime.”

Exxon declined to comment.

Denis Chabrol contributed reporting from Georgetown, Guyana.

AMERICAS

Guyana is poised to become a rich country. First, it has to figure out its electoral mess.

BY JACQUELINE CHARLES

MAY 13, 2020 07:09 PM, UPDATED MAY 15, 2020 04:05 PM



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The discovery of oil off its Atlantic coast is poised to transform a largely underdeveloped Guyana from one of South America's most polarized and poorest nations into possibly one of its richest.

But an ongoing post-electoral crisis involving allegations of fraud in its high stakes March 2 presidential vote, and questions about the ballot-counting in a key electoral district, threaten to derail the country's oil-driven economic boom and deepen already simmering ethnic tensions.

Last week, a three-member observer team from the 15-nation Caribbean Community bloc arrived in Georgetown, the country's capital, to supervise the Guyana Elections Commission's recounting of 2,339 ballot boxes. The long-delayed arrival came after legal challenges before the high court and President David Granger's declaration of victory even though international observers and the [Trump administration have said official results for the country's largest electoral district were not credible.](#)

At stake are oil and natural gas reserves. Eight billion barrels of oil have been discovered off the country's northern Atlantic coastline, where ExxonMobil is continuing to drill.

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The country's two main political forces, divided along racial and ethnic lines, are fighting for control of the reserves. The mostly Indo-Guyanese People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) ruled Guyana for 23 years before it lost the 2015 presidential vote to Granger. A retired military officer, Granger represents A Partnership for National Unity /Alliance For Change coalition, which is made up mostly of Afro-Guyanese political parties. It is currently the governing party.

The PPP, led by former president Bharrat Jagdeo, who serves as general secretary, has accused Granger and his coalition of rigging the vote to try to remain in power to control the coming oil wealth. The governing coalition, on the other hand, has said the PPP relied on a bloated voter list consisting of dead and migrated voters who don't live in Guyana.

RECOUNT MAY NOT SOLVE CRISIS

While the recount should help settle the question of who won, there are growing concerns that it may not, and South America's only English-speaking nation could become ground zero for the next democratic crisis in the hemisphere.

"The positioning of the main contestants with their allies on either side suggests that there's sufficient disgruntlement that whatever the results, the losing party will contest," said Ivelaw Griffith, a former vice chancellor of the University of Guyana who is currently a non-resident senior associate in the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"I anticipate there is going to be an election petition from whomever doesn't come out as the victor and the degrees of incivility will be ratcheted up," said Griffith who is Guyanese and a Caribbean security expert. "My only hope is the degree of incivility doesn't lead to any mayhem and deaths."

So far, things are calm in the country, which is also struggling to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus after registering its first death on March 11, and has since reported nine others and 110 infections of COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

On social media, however, the fight has been fierce, with each side's supporters lobbing accusations well before the recount got underway.

In the United States, a group of Guyanese-Americans in New York has hired lobbyists to take their concerns before members of Congress and the Trump administration. The administration has hinted at possible sanctions and visa revocations if anyone takes power without a credible and transparent vote recount.

"It's important to note that the individuals who seek to benefit from electoral fraud and form illegitimate governments will be subject to a variety of serious consequences from the United States," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in remarks on March 17.

On Wednesday, Florida Republican Sen. Marco Rubio's office also noted that he too has entered the political fray, penning a letter to Granger in which he warned that the recount was being closely monitored and needed to be conducted in a "free, fair, and transparent manner."

"In the midst of the challenges the world is facing due to the coronavirus pandemic, Guyana is on the verge of historic change and prosperity," said Rubio, who is chairman of the Senate's Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. "Decisions made today will determine whether or not the Guyanese people enter this new era united and confident that their political institutions fairly and equitably reflect their will."

Rubio's letter, dated Tuesday, was also signed by Sens. Jim Risch (R-ID) and Bob Menendez (D-NJ), chairman and ranking Member, respectively, of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, as well as Sens. Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Ben Cardin (D-MD).

In the letter, Rubio also chimed in on an ongoing controversy over the exclusion of the Carter Center from observing the recount after being denied permission by the government to fly into Guyana's closed airport. The center had 40 election experts and observers in Guyana to supervise the March balloting. In the 1980s, it played a critical role in helping the country strengthen its electoral process following the 1985 death of leader Forbes Burnham, who had maintained a firm grip on the country from 1964 until his death.

"A crucial part of this process is that credible international observers be allowed to return to Guyana and be given free and unfettered access to all aspects of the recount in order to confirm the

integrity of the process,” Rubio said.

Analysts in Guyana, however, say that while the government should have better handled the Carter Center issue, it’s time to move on given that the recount has started and both the Caribbean Community, CARICOM, and the Organization of American States are supervising.

FIVE HOURS TO COUNT ONE BALLOT BOX

Bruce Golding, the former prime minister of Jamaica who is currently serving as chief of mission for the OAS in Guyana, said Wednesday that while the recount was to last 25 days, it could be longer. Some ballot boxes, Golding said, required as much as five hours to be recounted.

Golding told the OAS permanent council he was troubled by his observations in the region 4 recount where the vote tabulations matched the official poll statements, but not what was signed by the electoral authority as the final result.

“I have never seen a more transparent effort to alter the results of an election,” Golding said.

The source of the contention, region 4 had several issues that have marred its results. There were repeated interruptions of the ballot counting and also a fight between the security services and political party representatives. There have also been a series of troubling actions by the main electoral authority.

Among the allegations: the authority blatantly disregarded the use of the poll statements and instead relied “on a spreadsheet of unknown origin which provided results that were significantly different from the Statements of Poll which party representatives claimed to be in their possession.” Golding said.

GRANGER’S COMMITMENT

Guyana’s ambassador to the OAS, Riyad Insanally, said Wednesday that while the recount was delayed by legal challenges, Granger remains committed to accepting the results.

Insanally said the electoral process is managed by the Guyana Elections Commissions, GECOM, which is an independent body constitutionally charged to conduct and supervise the elections.

“The executive branch of government has never tried to influence, interfere with or instruct GECOM,” he said.

He also noted that there has been no breakdown of the rule of law or public order in Guyana.

ETHNIC POLITICS

In Guyana, where politics is fought along racial and ethnic lines, Indo-Guyanese account for about 40 percent of the population, while Afro-Guyanese are 30 percent. About 20 percent of the population is considered mixed.

The March elections came more than a year after the country’s parliament issued a vote of no-confidence against Granger in December 2018. Granger’s party challenged the motion in the courts and eventually lost.

During that time, confidence in government waned as once hopeful Guyanese accused the government of not doing enough to create jobs and to address crime and corruption. Soon, Granger saw his already fragile coalition weaken further as ministers were lambasted for giving themselves raises while not addressing constituents’ needs.

WASHINGTON’S PREOCCUPATION

A lot is riding on the outcome of the recount, said José Cárdenas, who served in the National Security Council under President George W. Bush and regularly speaks with Trump administration officials. Cárdenas is part of a team hired by the International Center for Democracy in New York, made up of Guyanese-Americans in Queens who have been seeking to engage U.S. officials on the electoral crisis.

Cárdenas notes that the crisis was well underway even before March 2, with Granger’s no-confidence vote and views that he was dragging his feet on scheduling a vote.

“We’re seeing this play out of course against the massive backdrop of oil discovery and the fact Guyana is still there on the edge of an entirely new history,” Cárdenas said. “Everybody sees the stakes... a country on the precipice of a new future and the traditional political parties seemingly fighting over who is going to be able to control the petro windfall.”

“It’s something that Washington is watching,” he added. “Are we going to see another country dissolve to where citizens are pitted against citizens in a fight for power?”

Griffith, who was born in Guyana and previously taught at Florida International University in Miami, said while he hopes there’s resolution to the electoral crisis, his concerns have more to do with the future of a country loaded with issues that go far beyond who won on March 2. Those issues, which have to do with the fact that Guyana has a 285-mile-long Atlantic coastline with places as much as six feet below sea level, and its location next to Venezuela, are even more pertinent now with the oil discovery.

“Whoever is the victor in this election had better start planning to move that capital called Georgetown because of climate change. The wet neighborhood realities are going to create some very disastrous reality,” Griffith said “I worry not so much about elections but about the things coming down the pike.”